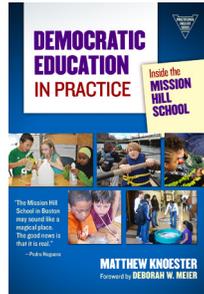


Beating the Odds.

A Book Review of *Democratic Education in Practice: Inside the Mission Hill School*

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KNOESTER'S 2012 VOLUME, *Democratic Education in Practice*, provides a powerful antidote to the despair progressive teachers too easily can feel in the face of the corporate-sponsored onslaught against 21st-century public schools. The book provides a fine-grained view of the Mission Hill School in Boston, started in 1997 by Deborah Meier and Brenda Engel, two of the nation's most committed and creative progressive educators. Knoester writes as both an insider and an outsider, since he taught at the school for five years before pursuing a PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His account demonstrates what can be accomplished even in the midst of today's far-reaching and pervasive education "deform" movement.

What is especially hopeful about Mission Hill School, like the Central Park East schools Meier previously helped create in New York City, is that educators there are shaping a progressive school that leads working-class children from diverse backgrounds to become academically successful. From Keddie's (1970) studies of open classrooms in London in the late 1960s to Delpit's (1995) critique of whole-language methods in the 1990s, researchers have raised concerns about the way student-centered pedagogies resonate with and better serve students from affluent backgrounds than they do children from less economically advantaged situations. Teachers at Mission Hill have adopted a variety of interactional and pedagogical approaches that avoid the missteps of earlier educators.

Educators' achievements at Mission Hill School are tied to their critique of what happens in too many conventional schools and their adoption of innovative practices responsive to the students and families they serve. Knoester identifies five challenges to democratic education in schools populated with students from low-income and non-White backgrounds: (1) insensitivity to cultural differences; (2) lack of responsiveness to concerns of parents and community members who are not White and middle class; (3) preoccupation with controlling students; (4) reliance on

simplistic understandings—such as performance on standardized tests—of students, teachers, and the nature of learning; (5) failure to recognize the way meaningful and caring student-teacher relationships are the foundation for educational success.

They have responded to these challenges by collectively crafting a school culture premised on the valuing of all its members—teachers, students, as well as families—and believing that all are capable of responsible self-governance, learning, and wise decision making. When asked about her own definition of a democratic school, Meier said: "It is one where you're continuously exploring how everybody's voice can be heard, and acted upon effectively" (Knoester, 2012, p. 12). The beginning of this process requires making sure that people feel safe enough to share their voices; because of this, Mission Hill School's emphasis on the cultivation of kindness and care becomes something more than a nice gesture. Genuine participation requires a sense of safety—for second graders as well as for teachers and parents. Democracy can work only when people feel as though they are partnering with others rather than being dominated. With this as a foundation, the school governance board (with eighth-grade representatives), the faculty, and the Family Council engage in the time-consuming and often difficult process of collective decision making.

The same faith in teachers' and students' capacity to make wise decisions can be seen in the way that teaching and learning occur at the school. Teachers decide to focus on a particular facet of three broad curricular themes that recur from year to year: American history and governance through the eyes of nondominant groups (fall), ancient civilizations (winter), and natural or physical

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sciences (spring). Teachers have the opportunity to respond to these themes in their own unique ways. Janerra Williams, for example, explored U.S. history through the eyes of African Americans by having her second-grade students examine photographs of critical moments in the civil rights movement and then restage scenes like the sit-in at the lunch counter at Woolworth's or the moment when nine students in 1957 walked with police protection into Little Rock Central High School.

Fundamental to education at Mission Hill is a belief that learning occurs when something conflicts with a person's current understanding of the world in ways that require a new interpretation of the phenomenon in question. To encourage students to engage in this process of continuous learning, teachers draw on the five habits of mind that are a hallmark of the Central Park East schools. These habits include looking for the evidence that lies behind an assertion, asking why the issue is or is not important, looking for ways what is being said is connected to things the learner already knows, determining the viewpoint that lies behind the assertion, and imagining alternatives to the conclusion or vision being presented in the assertion. When asked about the impact the cultivation of these habits had on her approach to learning, a recent Mission Hill graduate commented:

I feel like I use them pretty much every day. In every piece of work we use [in high school], I have to use it somewhere. It's kind of natural, since I've been doing it for nine years. . . . When I talk to people, I use evidence a lot. Because I try to back up my opinion with something I really know. (Knoester, 2012, p. 96)

This faith in the learner is seen also in the way that assessment is approached at the school. Although teachers there are now required to administer standardized tests used throughout Massachusetts, their preferred evaluative strategy involves the use of portfolios. Before they graduate from the school, all eighth graders, for example, must demonstrate their ability to use the five habits of mind as well as their competence in each of the academic disciplines and do this before a panel of staff, parents, and community members. According to Knoester:

Portfolios create a situation in which it is more difficult for students to say, "School is not for people like me." Rather, students may be more likely to conclude, "Part of who I am is a student, a reader, and a writer; and I can challenge myself at this." (2012, pp. 120–121)

The results of this educational process have been positive. As Knoester (2012) observes, "The waiting list for the school is long, graduates are generally admitted to the high schools of their choice, and 96.2% of the college-age graduates I surveyed for this book [75.4% response rate] had entered college" (p. 1). Eighth-grade graduates of Mission Hill have a 100% high school graduation rate (p. 161). The college-going rate for the 93% of students who graduate from other institutions within Boston Public Schools is, by comparison, 67%. Knoester admits that linking college attendance to a student's middle school education may well be a stretch (p. 161), but these figures suggest that the education students encounter at

Mission Hill is not harming them and appears to be promising in terms of their educational outcomes.

Despite its steady success, the good work that happens at Mission Hill School is continually threatened by state and national expectations regarding student testing and performance that jeopardize the school's effort to create a genuinely democratic and meaningful form of education for its students. As one parent observed:

The purpose of Mission Hill, as I see it, is to have each student recognize their own particular strengths and to develop them, and that is a very different prospect from the standardized test, which is to memorize a certain quantity of facts and spew them out. And for a lot of kids memorizing a quantity of facts does not do anything for helping them develop their own abilities and strengths. So really the purposes of the test are inimical to what Mission Hill is about. (Knoester, 2012, p. 116)

In the spring of 2012, Ayla Gavins, the current principal, advised her staff that she could lose her position if student scores on the state math exam did not improve (Chaltain, 2013). And in the fall of 2012, against the will of the staff and the parent community, the district office forced the school to move from its location in Mission Hill to a building in another neighborhood altogether. Faced with such threats and challenges, it is difficult to predict how long this remarkable educational experiment will be able to flourish.

For this reason, Knoester's (2012) detailed documentation of educational practice at the school seems especially valuable. Like Wiseman's 1994 film about Central Park East Secondary School, *High School II, Democratic Education in Practice*, Knoester's book offers clear evidence of what schools in the United States could be like if educators everywhere were encouraged to believe that "what motivates children is the meaning they are making in their explorations, the communities of which they are a part, and the performances or public successes that allow them to develop a strong public academic identity" (Knoester, 2012, p. 103). Such an education stands in stark contrast to one that does little more than tell far too many children they are inadequate and incompetent. It is difficult to imagine that a democracy of individuals taught to believe they are failures will be able to address the challenges currently facing the United States. Knoester's book shows what educators could do to sidestep this dark possibility.

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